O'Neill's 'Ah, Wilderness'

By BERT BINNY

ON COLLEGE BOARDS

SPRING, to many different people, is many different things. But to most it is a beginning. Innumerable poets, good, bad and indifferent, have recognized this and become activated accordingly. Competition in England is keen as to who can earliest advise The London Times that they have heard the first cuckoo.

Ancient religions, even including many not yet forgotten and some not yet unpractised, were very concerned with spring. The main difference between the viewpoint of the ancients and that of the poets lies in the latter's hailing of a phenomenon certain to occur and the former's vigorous efforts somehow to ensure that it would be brought about.

But always the underlying thoughts were bound up with rejuvenation, reconstruction, revival. The theme was renascence, resurgence, resurrection. "Spring," said poet Henry Timrod, "is a true reconstructionist." And 750 years before him the magnificent Omar Khayyam was exhorting everybody to ". . . fill the cup, and in the fire of spring, your winter-garment of repentance fling!"

Now, while all this has much to recommend it, there should be no forgetting that some departments of life attain their zenith in the spring. This is the season of their maturity; they are dormant while other things are at their most vibrant; their rebirth takes place when other things are reaching the fullness of their time. This, by the way, is a most satisfactory arrangement. It takes care that everything doesn't happen at once.

AUDITORIUM SHOW

Prominent on the list of the activities which fade into the background during the ardent days of spring and summer are those which take place on the stage. They are inevitably associated with the fall and winter. True, they maintain a precarious link between their successive seasons but they are not high in their particular sky at the same time as the sun in his.

This is very clearly so in Victoria where one of the first signs of spring are the last signs of the entertainment world. Three festivals cry finis to the winter's activities, the Southern Vancouver Island Drama Festival, the Schools' Drama Festival and the Greater Victoria Music Festival. And, prominent on the theatrical calendar at this time, is the annual production by the Victoria College Players.

THIS YEAR, opening at the College auditorium on Tuesday evening, the Players present "Ah, Wilderness," by Eugene O'Neill.

Over recent years the College thespians have adhered to a policy or demonstrated a predilection which has produced a series of plays by eminent modern playwrights. In 1958 there was "The Applecart," by George Bernard Shaw. The year before Arthur Miller's "The Crucible" was presented and, in 1956, "The Lady's Not for Burning," by Christopher Fry. Of the four authors concerned two are still living; Shaw died in 1950 and O'Neill in 1953.

VOICE IN WILDERNESS

But each of them cut a wide swathe through the literary hayfield.

There is always the suspicion that Shaw wrote "The Applecart" out of sheer devilment though there is no evidence to suggest, even remotely, that the same would apply to Miller with "The Crucible," Fry with "The Lady's Not for Burning" and, particularly, to O'Neill with "Ah, Wilderness."

O'Neill, consciously or unconsciously, engaged in the task of bringing to the theatrical world at large the realization that there was, in the New World, an independent stage, aware of its own form and existence and an acceptable companion to all other forms. Like John the Baptist and, indeed, like all others who spin the wheel or turn the scale, his voice was first heard only crying in the wilderness but such was the volume of the voice and the worth of the words it spoke that he achieved worldwide recognition.

JOHN HART, co-winner of best-actor award in Nanaimo Schools' Drama Festival last year, plays "Richard Miller" in new College presentation. MAUREEN GEE, as "Muriel," is his sweet friend, and BARBARA DICKOUT as "Belle," is the charmer attempting to come between.

As with the proverbial new broom so with Eugene O'Neill. He swept clean. In doing so he created quite a dust but now, after the dust has settled and the passage of years has put him and his works in far clearer perspective, doubts arise as to the extent of his genius.

Both O'Neill and Arthur Miller raised a question that will be a long time in the answering—if it is ever answered at all. As, for instance, in "Death of a Salesman" or "Ah, Wilderness," the object seems to be to show that tragedy or sorrow or fear or anger—in fact, any great emotion—is as much a part of the lives of little people as it is of the great and, moreover, just as full of objective impact. There does not appear to be much in everyday life to lend substance to the latter part of the thesis though the first part is obviously true. Opponents of the O'Neill-Miller theory simply aver that the death or fall from grace of a king or a great hero is infinitely more tragic and has infinitely greater repercussions than the death of a salesman; at any rate, to everyone but the immediate family and friends. In fact, they term the second merely sordid.

ADDED INTEREST

As brought to the stage by such people as the Greek tragedians, Shakespeare, Marlowe and many others, exceptional, high-placed events have always been accompanied by appropriate concomitants such as powerful verbal expression, impressive surroundings and brilliant, compelling action. The scion of royalty dies in a marble palace attended by a court and relatives almost choking with literary grace. Of course, this is not so with the ordinary man. His end or his failure occurs in a very ordinary place and amid an entourage of limited vocabulary and, likely enough, limited perceptions also.

Thus, the most interesting question that Miller and O'Neill raise is whether or not both sets of circumstances are equally impressive.

And critics have stated, quite without equivocation, that O'Neill's powers of expression were seldom equal to the demands of his scenes of crisis and emotion.

The topical upshot of all this is simply that the controversies centring around Eugene O'Neill and his use of the stage as well as around Eugene O'Neill and his powers of expression afford added interest to the production on Tuesday of one of his most successful plays. And, in this connection, it might be well to remember that "Ah, Wilderness" was written 13 years after the first professional production of an O'Neill play. It is, therefore, a pretty solid, settled form of O'Neill; as good an example as one could wish for upon which to base a judgment.

So much for the play.

AS TO THE PLAYERS there are quite a few of them but the central figure is that of "Richard Miller," played in this instance by John Hart. John is in his first year at the College and comes from Nanaimo. Last year, along with Ralph Vipond, he was co-winner of the best actor award in the Nanaimo schools' drama festival. He played the part of "Syd" in Merrill Denison's vignette, "Brothers in Arms," a part, incidentally, carried with great success two years previously by Syd Williams of Courtenay who spent all last year being "Century Sam."

Richard, of course, has his problems with members of the opposite sex. Solidly affectionate is "Muriel" and this part is carried by Maureen Gee. Maureen is comparatively recently from Blackpool in the famous English county of Lancashire — famous, that is, for Gracie Fields, George Formby and others of similar stripe. Maureen has participated in numerous school, church and drama club presentations including an appearance as the wife of Pontius Pilate in John Masefield's "The Crucifix."

But "Muriel" has vigorous if ephemeral competition for Richard's attention. This is supplied by "Belle," a young lady of doubtful pursuits. "Belle" is the sort of character who has been in existence since time immemorial but, because of her questionable activities and reputation, was never, until quite recently, mentioned in polite society. It was bold innovators like Eugene O'Neill who gave substance to her shadow and paraded her forth before the public gaze. Today "Belle" has many counterparts and is, therefore, far less startling than she was 20 or 30 years ago. Today she is no longer strange; just funny. She is no longer a revelation; just a different breed of cat.

BARBARA'S BEST PART

"Belle" is played by Barbara Dickout of Victoria, a second-year College student. "Belle," claims Barbara, is her first part in a major production although she has worked in a variety of skits and other programs at St. Ann's Academy. For Barbara to become "Belle" seems to call mainly for a lot of intellectual scaling down. The latter is anything but subtle.

Michael Deane of Victoria is "Wint Selby." Michael made an excellent "Nicobar," foreign secretary in Shaw's remarkable "Applecart" government. Previously, he was in Oak Bay High School's "Our Hearts Were Young and Gay," "Widdershins" and "The Boy in the Meadow."

The inebriated uncle, "Sid Davis," will be played by Karl Wylie who was "Dominique Lecler" in the Theatre Guild's "Dear Charles" and "Henry" in their more recent production, "The Little Hut." In 1953 he was in J. M. Synge's well-known "Riders to the Sea." Karl attended North Saanich High School and, up until 18 months ago when he returned to Victoria, had spent four years in Northern Rhodesia.

President of the College Players Club is Dianne Watkin who plays "Mildred Miller" in "Ah, Wilderness." Last year she assisted in the musical department during the production of "The Applecart."

The part of 11-year-old "Tommy Miller" will be carried by first-year student, Linda Johns. Linda, who was formerly at Oak Bay High School, has had her name on more music than drama programs, festival and otherwise. Her interest was in the clarinet which seems like rather a big jump from male impersonation.

EXPERIENCED CAST

Peter Marinker is a salesman in the O'Neill production. At Oak Bay High he was in various revues and he also played the grandmother in Milne's "The Man in the Bowler Hat" and a clown in Shakespeare's "Twelfth Night," both at University School. All this sounds like a very fair instance of great versatility.

In the 1958 presentation of "The Applecart" the part of "Mr. Vanhattan," the American ambassador to London, was played by Bob Taylor. This year Bob descends from ambassadorial rank to that of a Yale College student—name of "Art." At Oak Bay High School Bob was in two honor plays. He was the only male among nine girls when he appeared as the doctor in "Cradle Song," a winner in 1957. In 1955 he was "Joe Kershaw" in the sparkling production of "Today of All Days," the cast of which included the very accompilshed Valerie Dowling, and 1954 drama scholar-

(Continued on Page 5)